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Andrew Sobanet, *Jail Sentences: Representing Prison in Twentieth-Century French Fiction*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 254 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8032-1379-1.

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There is a long history of writing from French prisons, beginning with the fifteenth-century poet François Villon's "Ballade des pendus," continuing with André Chénier's verses, *Iambes* and the *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, both from the Reign of Terror, followed by Marie Cappelle-Lafarge's *Mémoires de Marie Cappelle (veuve Lafarge)* of the 1840's, as well as Paul Verlaine's 1893 account, *Mes prisons*, and, finding perhaps its richest expression in the twentieth-century works of Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Genet, Anne Huré, and Albertine Sarrazin. It is specifically prison texts from 1930 to 1997 that Andrew Sobanet explores in *Jail Sentences: Representing Prison in Twentieth-Century French Fiction*, using an approach that sets it apart from previous studies. Not surprisingly, earlier literary critics focused exclusively on canonical male authors, producing numerous studies of Genet in particular. Beginning in the 1970's, influenced by women's movements and French feminist thought, scholars turned their attention to neglected female writers. Generally speaking, the differences in approach to men's and women's prison texts have been significant. While, for instance, Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Coe explore Genet's works from the divergent perspectives of existential ontology and visionary poetics, respectively, they both insist on the author's transcendence of his pariah status through writing.[1] For critics of women's prison stories, on the other hand, social and literary constraints have been determinative. So, for example, both Anna Norris and I read Sarrazin's fictions in relation to conventionally negative views of female criminals and authors.[2] Likewise, Judith Scheffler's cross-century and transnational anthology of women's prison writings addresses the psychological effects of prison conditions on these authors.[3] Put another way: the focus of analysis of prison writings has been on either masculine revolt against or feminine refusal of their position as outlaw.

More recent critics of prison literature have also been inspired by Michel Foucault's ground-breaking reflections on the theory and practice of punishment in *Surveiller et punir*, published in 1975.[4] Foucault sees prisons as extensions of other institutions of "social control," such as schools, convents, and the military; these systems belong not to the history of law or ideas, but to the history of the body. Using his now-familiar but crucial insights into power relations as they inform and are informed by various social discourses, he links the changing modes and purposes of punishment to shifting political and economic systems. Thus, the ancien régime's goal of disciplining the criminal's body evolved into modern rehabilitative strategies aimed at modifying his or her psyche. By going beyond historical and sociological studies of the French penal system, Foucault opened the way for cross-disciplinary approaches embracing criminology, prison architecture, mind/body philosophy, queer studies, and gender and class analyses.

These multiple strands of criticism of French prison writing, all of which connect textual and social structures, point up the first important contribution *Jail Sentences* makes: it analyzes representative prison novels of the twentieth century from a "purely" literary angle, and it examines works by both men and women. His intention is to define a genre, albeit a slippery one, by laying out its conventions.

He investigates “a specific form of prison narrative: fictional texts that purport to document conditions and relations behind bars. *Jail Sentences* examines the narrative mechanics, the thematics, and the ideological impulses of such ‘prison novels’” (pp. 3-4). Less concerned with the interplay between cultural forces and prison writings, Sobanet places ideologies of punishment within the narrative techniques he examines. His central premise is that the boundary between fiction and authenticity is constantly blurred in these works: textual elements that seem transparently documentary are riddled with invention, and those put forth as imagined bear the marks of real-life accuracy. Thus, “it is this artful interplay of invention and actuality that sets prison novels apart from the traditional realist model” (p. 17). Sobanet explains his terms and chosen corpus carefully: “documentary fiction,” of which prison novels are an example, grounds its authority in lived experience and provides extensive description of that personal history—in this case, incarceration; the “testimonial narrative,” a form of “witness literature” that prison novels also resemble, seeks to “impart the telling of an individual or group experience to an audience that is ostensibly unfamiliar with what is recounted” (pp. 19-20). Similarly, some of the properties characteristic of fiction that one finds in prison novels—shifting narrative voices that include both first-person and omniscient third-person perspectives, chronological reorganization of events, or paratextual elements that call attention to artifice—are established clearly in the introduction. Finally, Sobanet eschews novels written from types of confinement other than imprisonment for criminal offenses (e.g., concentration camps, political captivity) in order to build in more focus. This tight hermeneutic framework, while it sharply delimits the scope of *Jail Sentences*, gives the book a satisfying coherence.

Further anchoring *Jail Sentences* in literary methods of analysis is its application of Philippe Lejeune’s concept of the “autobiographical pact” to the prison novels it considers.<sup>[5]</sup> According to Lejeune, this contract obligates the author to recount details of her or his life truthfully; in return, the reader will judge the account fairly. Sobanet exposes convincingly the ways each author manipulates the terms of the pact for a specific purpose: “The narrative particularities of the fiction studied here...create a contract between text and reader such that referentiality and verifiability are emphasized” (p. 15). It is precisely by exploiting the reader’s expectations that prison novels are able to achieve the individual and ideological objectives that straightforwardly polemical or confessional texts cannot.

The body of works Sobanet studies spans the twentieth century, when the rehabilitative mission of imprisonment became firmly entrenched. The first chapter is devoted to Victor Serge’s *Les hommes dans la prison* (1930), whose primary intent is “to promote a virulently anti-capitalist sociopolitical agenda” (p. 31).<sup>[6]</sup> Presented as an exemplar of the prison novel genre, it fictionalizes Serge’s imprisonment, in 1912, for associating with violent anarchist gangs and for planning their misdeeds. In Sobanet’s view, Serge draws on his own experience in order to produce the “documentary effect” (p. 49) that gives the novel political urgency; at the same time, he takes advantage of the liberties fiction offers to merge his personal struggle with working class strife in general. The absence of a plot line, the use of character types, and the plethora of concrete details invite a referential reading even as the narrator’s anonymity, the shifting point of view, and the omission of selected facts indicate invention. To point up Serge’s artfulness in *Les hommes*, Sobanet simultaneously examines his testimonial *Mémoires d’un révolutionnaire de 1901 à 1941*, published in 1951, but this comparison exposes one of the limitations of *Jail Sentences*’ formal approach: by scarcely addressing the dissimilar socio-historical contexts from which Serge’s two texts arose—World War I and 1920’s socialist movements for *Les hommes*, European fascisms of the 1930’s and 1940’s for the *Mémoires*—Sobanet’s treatment of the novel’s ideological project is necessarily circumscribed.<sup>[7]</sup>

Chapter two’s consideration of Jean Genet’s 1946 novel *Miracle de la rose* makes a forceful case that the work is both lyrical and documentary in effect but that its referentiality is “nothing more than artifice” (p. 63).<sup>[8]</sup> Genet’s overriding wish is to shock the bourgeois society that incarcerated him for theft, prostitution, and “lewd” (homo-sexual) acts. Confined as a child at the Mettray penal colony and later in various European prisons, he rejects his captors by glorifying his status as outcast. To achieve this

personal agenda, Genet, the most self-consciously manipulative of the writers studied in *Jail Sentences*, has the narrator of *Miracle*, “Genet,” refer to events in his own life, yet most of these events are factually false. In addition to using his own name, Genet includes ostensibly autobiographical remarks about the challenges of writing. Sobanet tackles the novel’s extraordinary complexity by likening its *mise en abîme* of the author’s past and present imprisonments to Proust’s chronological imbrications. By overlaying the narrator’s idealized memories of Mettray with the grim material conditions of his current prison, Genet not only introduces ambiguity into the novel, he gives it “poetic power” and intimations of the sacred (p. 72). Similarly, he interweaves graphic sexual references with beautiful fantasies about other convicts. One of the cleverest narrative devices in *Miracle*, Sobanet suggests, is its non-omniscient first-person narrator. “Genet”’s imperfect knowledge creates the illusion that what he claims is invented or real is the truth, thereby making the pull between fiction and non-fiction even more powerful. This chapter, despite some internal repetition, is the most successful: Sobanet manages to bring together all the levels on which Genet exploits the expectations of his imagined bourgeois reader.

Sobanet goes on to examine the fruitful tension between fiction and autobiography in Albertine Sarrazin’s *La cavale* (1965).<sup>[9]</sup> He astutely observes that, while the novel appears “strikingly apolitical” at first glance, it ultimately delivers a sharp condemnation of the passivity—far from the desired rehabilitation—imprisonment induces in inmates (p. 109). Sarrazin, who spent most of her short life behind bars for delinquency, theft and prostitution, amasses details of daily life in prison, as well as the “tedious judicial processes” that will keep the protagonist locked up for what seems an interminable sentence (p. 117). The resulting slowness of the narrative produces the same numbing effect on the reader that confinement has on the narrator: “Anick”’s initial energy and defiance (the “runaway” of the title evokes her plan to escape) wither into resignation. Sobanet deems Anick a “self-centered survivalist” whose “petty concerns” keep the story focused on the mundane (p. 121). This attention to the material features of prison Sarrazin knew first-hand, together with “paratextual markers” such as the dates of the novel’s composition and the mention of the names “Albertine-Anick,” highlight the autobiographical. But, many of these seemingly factual elements are fudged or invented. This uncertainty, Sobanet argues, allows Sarrazin to target her readers’ ignorance of prison life, thereby reinforcing the “truth” she seeks to convey (p. 141). While Sobanet alludes briefly to the other meaning of the book’s title, the imaginary horse that symbolizes the novel the narrator is writing in prison, he gives it short shrift. Consequently, the intellectual agency Anick demonstrates throughout the story is subsumed to her physical surrender, thereby reducing a significant dimension of the novel’s personal and collective critique.

The last chapter looks at a text that is very different from the first three: François Bon’s genre-bending *Prison* (1997), which is based on Bon’s experience teaching writing workshops in youth detention centers.<sup>[10]</sup> Bon himself was never in jail. His goal here is to “furnish a humanizing and realistic portrait, albeit a fictionalized one, of incarcerated young men” as a means to “normalize” their experience (pp. 146 and 171) and call for social justice. Its combining factual information about drug use, homelessness, and poverty with shifting narrative voices, fabricated non-fiction documents, and invented characters renders *Prison* intricately hybrid in theme and structure. For Sobanet, these multiple discontinuities disrupt the contract between text and reader more than any of the other works; one ironic result is that Bon’s writing technique—his “creative process and his alteration of his source material” (p. 175)—becomes transparent. Sobanet demonstrates perceptively another effect of *Prison*’s playing with accuracy: it “accentuate[s] the alterity of the prisoners as a group” (p. 159), adding pathos to their stories. Nonetheless, this chapter of *Jail Sentences* strains to interpret Bon’s narrative as a prison novel, as Sobanet identifies it, since the autobiographical pact scarcely applies. By its rejection of the conventions of the realist novel, *Prison* has more affinities with French experimental works of the 1950’s, the “new novels” that jettisoned that very pact.

*Jail Sentences*’s close analysis of literary mechanics, at a time when such an approach is critically unfashionable, makes the book all the more valuable. Moreover, it is extensively documented and highly

accessible. It does, however, have two flaws, one stylistic, the other methodological. The first, which pervades the "Introduction," is the overuse of the anticipatory phrase, "As we will see"—good editing would have corrected this and adjusted the presentation of ideas accordingly. The other flows from Sobanet's focus on the slippage between fiction and authenticity in each of the works he examines. Since all the authors adopt similar strategies to blur generic boundaries, and since each writer uses a particular device to achieve several different ends, there is a great deal of internal repetition in *Jail Sentences*. But, these weak points do little to diminish the important contribution Sobanet's inquiry makes to the field of prison literature, one whose object of study has long been, and continues to be, very much with us.

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951); Richard Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet* (London: Peter Owen, 1968).

[2] Anna Norris, *L'écriture du défi: Textes carcéraux* (Birmingham, AL: Summa, 2003); Elissa D. Gelfand, *Imagination in Confinement: Women's Writings from French Prisons* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983).

[3] Judith Scheffler, *Wall Tappings*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (CUNY Feminist Press, 2002).

[4] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

[5] Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*. (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

[6] Victor Serge, *Les hommes dans la prison* (Paris: Rieder, 1930).

[7] Victor Serge, *Mémoires d'un révolutionnaire de 1901 à 1941* (Paris: Seuil, 1951).

[8] Jean Genet, *Miracle de la rose* (Paris: L'Arbalète, 1946).

[9] Albertine Sarrazin, *La cavale* (Paris: Pauvert, 1965).

[10] François Bon, *Prison* (Paris: Verdier, 1997).

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